



Chemochromic Hydrogen Leak Detectors

Robust, simple, and easy-to-detect, color-changing hydrogen sensors warn against explosion hazard.

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At NASA, hydrogen safety is a key concern for space shuttle processing. Leaks of any level must be quickly recognized and addressed due to hydrogen's lower explosion limit. Chemo-chromic devices have been developed to detect hydrogen gas in several embodiments. Because hydrogen is odorless and colorless and poses an explosion hazard, there is an emerging need for sensors to quickly and accurately detect low levels of leaking hydrogen in fuel cells and other advanced energy-generating systems in which hydrogen is used as fuel.

The device incorporates a chemo-chromic pigment into a base polymer. The article can reversibly or irreversibly change color upon exposure to hydrogen. The irreversible pigment changes color from a light beige to a dark gray. The sensitivity of the pigment can be tailored to its application by altering its exposure to gas through

the incorporation of one or more additives or polymer matrix. Furthermore, through the incorporation of insulating additives, the chemochromic sensor can operate at cryogenic temperatures as low as 78 K.

A chemochromic detector of this type can be manufactured into any feasible polymer part including injection molded plastic parts, fiber-spun textiles, or extruded tapes. The detectors are simple, inexpensive, portable, and do not require an external power source. The chemochromic detectors were installed and removed easily at the KSC launch pad without need for special expertise. These detectors may require an external monitor such as the human eye, camera, or electronic detector; however, they could be left in place, unmonitored, and examined later for color change to determine whether there had been exposure to hydrogen.

In one type of envisioned application, chemochromic detectors would be fabricated as outer layers (e.g., casings or coatings) on high-pressure hydrogen storage tanks and other components of hydrogen-handling systems to provide visible indications of hydrogen leaks caused by fatigue failures or other failures in those systems. In another type of envisioned application, chemochromic detectors of this type could be optoelectronically instrumented for monitoring to provide measured digital indications of color changes indicative of the presence of hydrogen.

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Compatibility of Segments of Thermoelectric Generators

A compatibility factor that depends only on material and temperature has been defined.

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A method of calculating (usually for the purpose of maximizing) the power-conversion efficiency of a segmented thermoelectric generator is based on equations derived from the fundamental equations of thermoelectricity. Because it is directly traceable to first principles, the method provides physical explanations in addition to predictions of phenomena involved in segmentation. In comparison with the finite-element method used heretofore to predict (without being able to explain) the behavior of a segmented thermoelectric generator, this method is much simpler to implement in practice: in particular, the efficiency of a segmented thermoelectric generator can be estimated by evaluating equations using only hand-held calculator with this method. In addition, the method provides for determi-

nation of cascading ratios. The concept of cascading is illustrated in the figure and the definition of the "cascading ratio" is defined in the figure caption.

An important aspect of the method is its approach to the issue of compatibility among segments, in combination with introduction of the concept of compatibility within a segment. Prior approaches involved the use of only averaged material properties. Two materials in direct contact could be examined for compatibility with each other, but there was no general framework for analysis of compatibility. The present method establishes such a framework.

The mathematical derivation of the method begins with the definition of reduced efficiency of a thermoelectric generator as the ratio between (1) its thermal-to-electric power-con-

version efficiency and (2) its Carnot efficiency (the maximum efficiency theoretically attainable, given its hot- and cold-side temperatures). The derivation involves calculation of the reduced efficiency of a model thermoelectric generator for which the hot-side temperature is only infinitesimally greater than the cold-side temperature. The derivation includes consideration of the ratio (u) between the electric current and heat-conduction power and leads to the concept of compatibility factor (s) for a given thermoelectric material, defined as the value of u that maximizes the reduced efficiency of the aforementioned model thermoelectric generator. It turns out that s depends only on the absolute temperature (T) and on intrinsic properties of the ma-